

Bless Society Through Your Work

From the Theology of Work Project

In Jeremiah chapter 29, the prophet explains God's intention for his people's work. The people Israel should work not only to benefit themselves, but to bless and serve the communities around them.

This theme was already present in earlier chapters of Jeremiah, as in God's command not to oppress the aliens living within Judah's borders. Indeed, working for the good of the wider society is part of the Covenant to which God continues to call his people: "Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him" (Genesis 18:18).

False prophets had told the Jews in exile that God's favor rested only on Israel, to the exclusion of its neighbors.

They promised that Babylon would fall, Jerusalem would be saved, and the people would soon return home. Jeremiah attempted to counteract that false proclamation with God's truth: the people would be in exile in Babylon for seventy years. Babylon would be this generation's only home.

Given this reality, God called the people to work diligently. The Jews were meant to flourish in Babylon, even though this was their place of punishment and repentance. Moreover, the Jews' success in Babylon was tied to their captors' success. "Pray to the Lord on [the city's] behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jeremiah 29:7). This call to civic responsibility twenty-six hundred years ago is just as valid today. We are called to work towards the prosperity of our entire community, not merely towards our own limited interests. Like the Jews of Jeremiah's day, we

are far from perfect. We may even be suffering for our own faithlessness and corruption. Nevertheless, we are called and equipped to be a blessing to the communities in which we live and work.

God's provision is so great that even when his people's homes are destroyed, lands confiscated, and rights violated, they still have enough to prosper themselves and bless others. But only if they depend on God. According to Jeremiah 29, the people must not only work faithfully, but pray faithfully for the community around them.

The feeling of exile is familiar to many working Christians. We are used to finding God in church, among his followers. But in the workplace, working alongside both believers and nonbelievers, we may not expect to find God's presence. But God is present nonetheless, always looking to reveal himself to all those who will recognize him there.

God's purpose for work in Jeremiah 29 immediately calls into doubt any modern scheme designed for the special benefit of Christians. Any trade organization, hiring practice, tax or regulatory advantage designed to benefit only Christians is not blessing the wider world. Similarly, business leaders must put their constituents first in order to succeed themselves. Product development, marketing, sales and customer support are only truly effective when the customer comes first. The order of blessing in Jeremiah 29 starts with God's people's faithful work, flows to those who

are not God's people, and only in the end extends to God's people themselves. This is perhaps the most profound economic principle in Jeremiah, that working for the good of others is the only reliable way to work for your own good. It is only in blessing others that we can experience God's blessing ourselves.